

8. “Of nations large and small”: an overview of multilateral law-making processes in the United Nations Organisation

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In fact, it is customary to talk about the post-1945 world order and to imbricate multilateralism with the system of the United Nations. It is true that multilateralism witnessed an unprecedented growth after that time, a trend that was made possible by the proliferation of international organizations, both within the United Nations Organization itself with the creation of many technical institutions, or beyond the system—for instance, regional political organizations.
(Daudet 2019, p. 39).¹

[Demography] has always been a sensitive and classic stake of the democratic tradition. How far beyond a certain number of citizens can a republic still claim to be a democracy? If this becomes problematic well beyond the canonical examples of Athens, Corsica, Geneva, or Poland [...] what will be said, beyond the billions, of a universal democratic model which, if it does not regulate a world State or super-State, would still command an international law of European origin?
(Derrida 2020 p. 101).

INTRODUCTION: “WE THE PEOPLES OF THE UNITED NATIONS”

Where can one, if at all, locate the nebulous notion of “the international community” (Johns 2024)? One cannot find it on a political map. There, instead,

¹ Author’s own translation. Thereafter, any material in Castilian, French, or German will be treated in the same way.

one finds neatly bounded nation-states, which clash as if they were “billiard balls or chess figures” over the Earth’s territory (Wolfers 1962, p. 82). And yet, when one thinks of “the international,” it is likely that at least one place comes to mind: the main Headquarters building used by the United Nations Organisation (henceforth, the UN) in New York City (Quiroga-Villamarín 2025b). This is, of course, only one of the many venues that claim to serve as the dwellings of “the international” (Quiroga-Villamarín 2024a). But the UN Headquarters in Manhattan remains perhaps the most important of them in folk imaginaries of international law and institutions – and not in vain, it has been called a veritable “international territory” (Bartos and Hitchens 1994). While rather imprecise from a legal or technical point of view, this moniker carries some weight. For it is in this very building where every North Atlantic fall, around September or October, the international community comes together to deliberate. It does so in the form offered by this institution’s General Assembly (henceforth GA) – a tradition that can be traced all the way to the first Assembly of the League of Nations (which was the UN’s institutional predecessor), held in November 1920 (Gregory 1921).

In the GA, the voice (and vote) of every single state has the same importance (see also Chapters 6 and 9): one is reminded of de Vattel’s (2008, p. 75) famous quip on the equal sovereignty of dwarves and giants in what was once called the law of nations – the immediate predecessor to today’s international law. The UN stands, as the preamble of its Charter puts it, for “[...] the equal rights of men and women and of nations large and small.” This is a logic of deliberation that we cannot afford to take for granted. For centuries in European and global history, decisions related to international affairs were, by and large, taken by Great Powers in secluded rooms – and, in a way, perhaps some important geopolitical decisions are still taken in this manner (Quiroga Villamarín 2025a)! But since the wake of the Great War of 1914–1918, one of the promises of the so-called liberal international rules-based order was that henceforth “[...] diplomacy shall proceed always frankly and in the public view [...]” – to put it in the terms of one of the famous points issued by the United States President Woodrow Wilson to end the conflict (Throntveit 2011). This has also been called the turn towards a “new diplomacy” (Géraud and Pertinax 1945) and has been followed, at least in principle, with a corresponding prohibition on secret law-making processes under international law (Donaldson 2017). The League Assembly, and the GA, embody this promise: they allow all states to come together and, *as peers*, to address international matters and codify common normative standards following the principle of sovereign equality (Klein 1974). This has also been called “parliamentary” (Götz 2005) or “conference” diplomacy (Hankey 1946; Kaufmann 1996), as these new global assemblies operate following the rules of parliamentary

procedure. Another way of understanding the logic of these democratic law-making forms is through the label of *multilateralism* (Alvarez 2000; Boyle and Chinkin 2007, pp. 98–162).

And yet, how do these multilateral law-making processes actually – if at all – work? It is well known, after all, that a camel is but a horse designed by committee (Goldman 1966, p. 57). As such, one can understand why so many critics deeply suspect that any matter, let alone a truly complicated or technical problem of a global scope, could be effectively addressed by a two- or three-week long meeting where 193 states participate as equals. And in any case, who speaks on behalf of the UN as a whole? Does this capability to represent the institution belong to its permanent staff? Or to its member states? Or, perhaps, its donors? To answer this difficult question, scholars of international affairs have long argued that the best way to understand this institution is as a nebulous space where parallel worlds meet and work in tandem: there is a “first UN” constituted by its staff; a “second UN” composed of its member states; and even a “third UN” made up of the efforts of civil society organisations (Weiss et al. 2009). Hurd (2024, pp. 17–43), moreover, has helpfully distinguished that the UN can: act as an international *actor* in its own right; be a *source* of resources for other players (such as states or civil society organisations); or serve as a *forum* for international disputes. Just as states are not, in fact, homogenous “black boxes” but rather “configurations of individual and group interests who then project those interests into the international system through a particular kind of government” (Slaughter and Hale 2013, para. 17), the same is true for the UN itself. There are many different actors, organs, and processes colliding and colluding under the common “UN blue” flag. Indeed, the mere fact that the colour of the flag was originally named after Edward Stettinius Jr. – head of the USA delegation in the institution’s constitutional conference held in San Francisco back in 1945 – already tells us that there are layers of history and politics behind its façade of apolitical, humanitarian, and universal aspirations (Gowan 2003; Mazower 2009).

With this in mind, in this chapter I provide an introductory overview of the way in which this universal organisation that purports to represent “we the peoples” operates (Schermers 1997). To do so, (1) after this introduction, (2) I first review its different organs, placing especial attention on the hierarchies and delegation of law-making competences between them (Colombos 1947). This, in turn, (3) allows me to trace the main processes of international law-making within this international institution – distinguishing between those used for “hard” *vis-à-vis* “soft” normative standards (Abbott and Snidal 2000). Finally, (4) I conclude on some remarks on what can the exercise of simulating the “new Leviathan” – as Crawford (2014, p. 302) once called the UN’s Security Council – teach us about power, and powerlessness, in global governance today (Quiroga-Villamarín 2023, pp. 18–23).

ORGANISING THE ORGANISATION: AN OVERVIEW OF THE UN'S INSTITUTIONAL HIERARCHIES

To understand how a state works, one must study its national constitution. For International Organisations (IOs), this role is fulfilled by its constitutive treaty – that is, the international instrument subscribed by nation-states to create this institution (Brölmann 2020). For the League of Nations, this was its Covenant – subscribed in 1919, in the wake of the end of the Great War and the subsequent peace negotiations held in Paris. The UN's constitutive treaty, in turn, is its Charter of 1945, negotiated after the Second World War (see Chapter 6). While one does not have to agree with the proposition put forward by Tomuschat (1995), Fassbender (1998a), and others to understand such a Charter as a global constitution, this treaty does serve as the institutional framework for the everyday operations of the UN. It establishes its organs, assigns jurisdictional competences, and empowers actors to carry out certain operations within the bounds of what has now been called “UN law” (Conforti 2005). To successfully pursue their law-making goals within this institution, lawyer-diplomats (regardless of whether they are affiliated with the institution itself, or if they represent the interests of a member state or Non-Governmental Organisation (NGO)) need to master this body of regulations (Conforti 1969).

Following an institutional design that was, by and large, taken from the experience of the League of Nations, the UN is composed of several “principal organs,” which may in turn create further “subsidiary organs” (UN Charter, Article 7; see also Chapter 6). As we noted above, at the very heart of the institution lies the GA: a global plenary body which meets at least once a year and has a very broad series of competences that are regulated by Articles 9–22 of the Charter. Each member has one vote – and most matters are decided following a simple majority rule (UN Charter, Article 18). However, on “important questions,” a two-thirds majority is required: this includes all matters related to peace and security; the election of members for the other principal organs of the UN; budgetary questions; and the issues related to membership (admission, expulsion, suspension of rights). By a simple majority vote, moreover, any issue can be elevated to this category of “important question” and require a two-thirds majority for decision- and law-making purposes (Bailey 1966). Changes in the composition of the UN as a whole have changed the voting patterns within the institution and its history is full of controversial discussions about voting blocs or “automatic majorities” (Nurullayev and Papa 2023; Rowe 1969, p. 232).

Pursuant to Article 21, the GA can adopt its own rules of procedure, which were last amended in 1984 (A/520/Rev.15). To facilitate the herculean task of this rather unruly global parliament, the GA is in turn subdivided into six

Main Committees with different thematic mandates. Their names and competences are as follows:

- First: matters of disarmament & international security.
- Second: economic & financial questions.
- Third: social, humanitarian, & cultural matters.
- Fourth: special political issues and those related to decolonisation.
- Fifth: administrative & budgetary concerns.
- Sixth: legal questions.

Additionally, the GA also counts on a Credentials Committee and a General Committee. The former examines the legal standing of each delegation to represent its nation-state, while the latter oversees the general work of this body. This means, for instance, that the first deliberation of any given issue occurs before a small group of states within a Main Committee before it is then forwarded for a review of the plenary body of the GA as a whole (Alger 1966) – once again, following standard parliamentary practice in comparative domestic law (Jameson 1894). For instance, for the purposes of international law-making, the Sixth Committee of the GA plays a salient role as it is the body that first studies any juridical matter before the UN and as such fosters the development of “new law” (Hazard 1963). Another important subsidiary organ which was established by the GA in 1947 and that works quite closely with the Sixth Committee in this regard is the International Law Commission (thereafter, ILC). This latter body is composed of individual experts – most of them law professors or lawyer-diplomats – who have the task of initiating studies and making recommendations for the progressive development and codification of international law (United Nations 2021). Previous landmark efforts in international law-making – take, for instance, the UN Vienna Convention on the Law of Treaties of 1969 – were made possible because of the close interrelation of work between the ILC, the Sixth Committee, the GA, and an additional treaty-making conference – see, generally Bianchi and Zarbiyev (2024, pp. 49–84).

This last step is important because, as we will see with more detail below, the GA does not generally have – by itself – the competence to make *binding* law or decisions which are directly enforceable. Instead, within the UN system, these sorts of powers are – for better or worse – entrusted solely to the UN Security Council (henceforth, SC). Pursuant to Articles 23–32 of the Charter, this later organ functions as a smaller (and hence more exclusive) body, which is generally tasked with the maintenance of international peace and security – following, by and large, the distribution of competences between the Council and Assembly of the League of Nations (Quiroga Villamarín 2025a). And for those purposes, this body is given a series of powers duly regulated in Chapters

VI and VII of the Charter. This division is important because, generally, only measures adopted in the framework of Chapter VII are legally binding and directly opposable to all states (de Wet 2024, pp. 1578–1622). Indeed, the logic behind this division of competences between these two principal organs is that only the SC could act as the World’s “policeman” (Schlesinger 1994) while the GA would be mainly devoted to global deliberation (Touloumi 2024). For that reason, the SC has reserved seats for five “permanent members”: which were the Great Powers that created the organisation in the wake of their victory in the Second World War (Bosco 2009). In addition, the Council counts on the participation of ten non-permanent members which are elected by the GA following a logic of geographical representation. Given the unequal nature of this body, there has been much discussion about reforming it (see Fassbender 2020).

While these two bodies have a clear precedent in the structure of the League of Nations, in the making of the UN two additional Councils were created (Ravndal 2023). In a way, they stand halfway between the GA and the SC in their composition and mandate. They have the advisory and deliberative nature of the GA, but with a more limited membership to allow for the more detailed study of technical issues. These are the Economic and Social Council (thereafter, ECOSOC) and the Trusteeship Council – regulated, respectively, by Articles 61–72 and 75–85 of the Charter. While the latter no longer has a substantive function (as, technically, all of the UN’s trust territories have now achieved independence), it was an important forum during the decades of formal decolonisation (Higgins et al. 2017). The ECOSOC, in turn, continues to have an important role in the inner workings of the UN (Trent and Schnurr 2017, pp. 71–97) and has established a plethora of programmes and subsidiary organs as it was a broad mandate that includes “human rights and fundamental freedoms” along with any “international economic, social, cultural, educational, health, and related matters” (UN Charter, Article 62). In addition, the so-called “UN family” is also composed of a series of Specialised Agencies (Dahl et al. 2020, pp. 293–308). These are separate IOs who nonetheless work closely with the UN, in terms specified by inter-institutional relationship agreements (Urueña 2022). They are too vast to review here, but they are an indispensable component of the “alphabet-soup of UN bodies” (Sharma 2007, p. 220).

But these organs cannot operate on their own. To assist the member state delegations in their law-making activities, the UN Secretariat was also established as a principal organ in its own right under Articles 97–101 of the Charter. A vast network of international civil servants is overseen by the Secretary-General (SG): the UN’s “chief administrative officer” (UN Charter, Article 97), who is appointed by the GA in tandem with the “recommendation” of the SC. As Chesterman (2007) has aptly noted, this difficult position sometimes

requires its officeholder to act as a mighty “general” while at other times to pretend *he* —and yes, the post has only been occupied by men so far— is but a modest “secretary.” The SG has the capacity to act in all meetings of the principal organs and to execute the missions entrusted to him by them (UN Charter, Article 98). He may even refer matters related to “international peace and security” directly to the attention of the SC (UN Charter, Article 99). The SG also runs the staff of the organisation and prepares a yearly report of its functions (Troy 2021). These more technical powers allow the SG to have an enormous power of framing in relation to how the institution conceives its agenda and its priorities.

Finally, the UN has another principal organ which sits in the city of The Hague, operating somewhat aloof from its other institutional bodies. That is the International Court of Justice – or as international lawyers like to call it, the World Court – which is regulated by Articles 92–96 of the Charter (Gross 1967). It was created following the experience of the interwar Permanent Court of International Justice and serves as the institution’s highest judicial body (Knaap 2023). As such, much of its work pertains to the solution of international disputes – often bilateral in nature. However, for the purposes of our overview, it is important to note that the World Court also has the competence to deliver advisory opinions on any legal questions if it is asked to do so by either the GA or the SC (UN Charter, Article 96 (1)). Moreover, any other organ of the UN or its Specialised Agencies can also request such opinions, so long as these relate to “legal questions arising within the scope of their activities” (UN Charter, Article 96 (2)). In the last few years, the advisory function of the World Court has gained a special salience in global governance (Galbraith 2023).

None of these organs exist in splendid isolation. If one studies the way the UN has addressed – or has failed to engage with – any given international issue, one will see a complex interplay of its different bodies and other actors. Take, for instance, the UN’s involvement in the partition of the Mandate of Palestine in 1947–1948: a pressing issue which the first SG rightly identified as the institution’s “first major test” (Ravndal 2016) and that continues to haunt international law and institutions to this very day (PARISS Collective 2025; Zarbiyev 2024). Indeed, the UN has been involved in this issue by: issuing recommendations adopted within GA; establishing subsidiary organs that report to the Secretariat; addressing the conflict as a threat to international peace and security in the deliberations of the SC (including, for instance, adopting a truce supervision operation); or even through the emission of advisory opinions by its World Court (Quiroga-Villamarín forthcoming). As such, it is difficult to speak of UN action – or inaction – as if it were a monolithic entity. In practice, the UN is better understood as a tripartite entity (functioning as an *actor*, *resource*, and *forum*) whose operations are already embedded in a very

dense inter- and extra-institutional context. As we saw above, this is important because each UN organ has a different authority and mandate – and only a few of them can take binding decisions or make “new law.” We turn to these normative hierarchies now.

SPEAKING AS ONE: THE UN AS A VENTRILOQUIST LAW-MAKER AND ENFORCER

Given that there is no such thing as an “international constitution,” the cornerstone of our modern system of public international law is the consent of states to be bound to multilateral rules (Bodansky and Watson 1992). Indeed, even the UN Charter’s highly debated claim to act as a global constitution of sorts is anchored on the fact that it has been widely ratified and adopted by almost all “peace-loving states” and has “universal” acceptance (Peters 2009). Given that there is no international authority above sovereign states, all law must have been accepted (expressly or tacitly) by them. By the same token, there is no single ultimate “enforcer” of international legal obligations – a fact that has created much debate and anxiety in the discipline (Quiroga-Villamarín 2024b). This fact places IOs in a rather awkward situation: they exist as independent legal creatures, but they can only create “new law” or enforce it to the extent that they were authorised to do so by states, as the main subjects of international law, themselves (Quiroga-Villamarín and Mansouri 2025). For this reason, Donaldson’s (2021) use of the metaphor of ventriloquism to refer to the League of Nations is quite fitting, and it could be extended in a different way to think about the UN today. This organisation can have law-making powers or enforce obligations insofar as it “speaks” on behalf of its founding member states.

But not every organ or decision-making procedure within the UN is authorised to speak with such a *hard*, thundering voice (see also Chapters 6 and 9). In most cases, the UN’s work is reduced to *soft* whispers: recommendations and expressions of concern. For that reason, scholars of global governance have distinguished between *binding* decisions or norms and those of a *soft* nature (Goldmann 2012). But this is not to say that the latter are irrelevant (Krisch 2014; Merry 2014; Peters 2011). There has been a rich debate in the literature in relation to how non-binding standards, despite their “liquidness,” have managed to become very influential in global governance (Krisch 2017). I will not review these debates here due to a lack of space, but see Quiroga-Villamarín (2020). What matters, for the purposes of our overview, is that a fair assessment of the UN’s operations in relation to any given matter must bear into account these differential normative and enforcement-related competences. Or, to put it in terms of a popular proverb used in my polity of birth and other Castilian-speaking jurisdictions: you cannot ask the elm tree to give pears. In

other words, one cannot demand – as a concerned global citizen but especially as a state delegate or NGO representative engaging with the UN’s operations – for an organ to speak with a voice that it is not legally authorised to use. A competent legal or diplomatic operator must engage, productively and creatively, with the possibilities that exist within these boundaries.

In practice, this means that the powers of this IO are heavily slanted towards the SC (Simpson 2004). Only this body – and only on certain occasions – can speak on behalf of the international community and use its imperative voice to issue orders and establish binding norms. But this robust normative and executive authority comes at a very high cost. To do so, the SC requires the “concurring votes of the permanent members” (UN Charter, Article 27 (3)). In reality, this gives these five founding member states the right to effectively veto any law-making effort or executive decision – an issue which has been hotly debated in the literature since the very inception of the organisation itself (Fassbender 1998b; Gifkins 2021; Lee 1947; Quiroga Villamarín 2025a). For that reason, on many occasions in which the UN needed to act it has found itself paralysed by Great Power rivalry and disagreement. As Moyn (2022) or Peters (2023) have noted, on many occasions the permanent members have used their veto privilege to shield themselves from scrutiny – exposing the Achilles heel of a system that was premised on the idea that these Great Powers would use their “policeman” function for the common good. Indeed, on many occasions much anger and frustration against the UN for its (in)action ought to be directed to the stubbornness of specific SC permanent members. And yet, on some occasions the SC has been able to effectively come together to speak with a single voice and exercise its “muscular humanitarianism” pursuant to Chapter VII of the Charter (Orford 1999). Indeed, during a brief window of Great Power reconciliation after the end of the Cold War, there was much hope – and anxiety – in relation to its role as a “world legislature” of sorts (Talmon 2005).

The GA and the SG do not have the competence to invoke the powers regulated in that chapter and are instead relegated to the mechanisms established in Chapter VI in relation to the pacific settlement of disputes. To address the gap created by the situations in which political tensions impeded the SC from speaking with a single voice, the GA and SG have sought to adopt peacekeeping operations of their own – in what has been called, following a former SG, “Chapter Six and a Half” (Groom 2004, pp. 152–153; Tudor 2023). But these operations, as they are not undertaken under the terms of Chapter VII, are always precarious and depend on the consent of the host state and the active and cooperative participation of member states (Duursma et al. 2024). We see, once again, that much of the UN’s power depends on its ability to act as a ventriloquist: to be backed in its talk by other member states who are actually willing, and able, to also do the walking (Kapur 2015).

But this does not mean that the GA – including its subsidiary organs or other similar bodies with mere “soft” powers – are irrelevant in global governance. An important competence they have, in particular in relation to law-making, is to lay the groundwork for a posterior conclave of states to adopt “new” law – consenting to it and endorsing it in their own voice. Perhaps the most famous example of this is the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which was adopted by a non-binding resolution of the GA in late 1948 after a complicated process of negotiation which included this body, the ECOSOC, and other subsidiary organs (Quiroga-Villamarín 2019). On its own, this resolution is quite soft. But it paved the road for a subsequent flurry of law-making initiatives that culminated not only in the two binding – and thus, *hard* – International Human Rights Covenants of 1966 (Cole 2005), but to a plethora of human rights-related normative initiatives, both hard and soft (see Moeckli et al. 2022). On many occasions, the UN has been able to solidify its efforts with the crystallisation of its soft recommendations or guidelines into a hard treaty subscribed by states in a special codification conference.

A similar role has been played by the World Court in relation to its advisory opinions. While its contentious judgements are, in principle, only opposable to the bilateral parties in dispute (following, once again, the principle of state consent to international adjudication), scholars have long recognised these non-binding opinions as rich materials that cannot – on their own – create “new law” but can help states or actors accurately identify already existing norms (Mayr-Singer and Mayr 2016). Take, for instance, the World Court’s advisory opinion in relation to the legality of nuclear weapons (see Matheson 1997). It was originally requested by the World Health Organisation, but the World Court decided that such a Specialised Agency did not have the mandate to request such a broad opinion (Klabbers 2009). Instead, it answered the call of the GA and reiterated fundamental principles of public international law in what has been a widely cited decision. Ultimately, the World Court concluded – in what has been a very controversial opinion – not to pronounce a definitive (and thus, *hard*) conclusion on the legality of these weapons, deferring implicitly to the haunting presence of state consent (Falk 1997). But along the way, it expressed many *soft* opinions that have since become widely accepted, following the interplay of several UN organs. In this way, while the UN (*qua actor*) declined from prohibiting nuclear weapons, it served as a *forum* for discussion and provided *resources* for further law-making efforts. It might have been a softer approach than most expected – but it is certainly not the same as silence or inaction. Ultimately, the strength of the UN’s voice depends on that of its member states (see also Chapter 6).

CONCLUDING REMARKS: THE NEW LEVIATHAN?

In our rather dark times, I am tempted to sometimes share the “hackneyed popular conceptions [...] which see the UN as incompetent and malevolent at worst” (Sharma 2007, p. 220). While Rome and the rest of the world burns, it is not unfair to wonder if so much attention, and resources, should be devoted to the theatrical antics of the GA in Manhattan (Ball 2020). What is the use, a concerned citizen or scholar might wonder, of having such a global “talking shop” (Panke 2014)? And if there have been increasing concerns about the UN’s operations in the “Headquarters,” the same can be said of its (in)actions out in “the field” – to use a dichotomy central to the work of this and other international institutions (Quiroga-Villamarín 2025b). Indeed, the last couple of decades have been marked by very important debates on how to render the UN accountable for its failures and omissions – and of those, there are plenty of examples all around the world (Klabbers 2017). If Borges (1975) would rewrite his *Universal History of Infamy* today, one would imagine that the names of several catastrophic failures of the UN might find themselves included. Just think of Rwanda, Srebrenica, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, or Haiti – to name a couple of salient instances (Howard and Dayal 2018).

Criticism of the UN, by and large, oscillates around two poles: it is either *powerless* (and just a mere space for lofty rhetoric in Manhattan, Geneva, or Vienna) and/or it fails to aptly exercise its *powers* when push comes to shove “in the field.” The disjointed nature of these two prongs already hints at the fact that the reality of the UN can only lie somewhere in the middle. It is neither a powerful supra-state nor an empty shell of deliberation: the UN can only be what its member states decide to make it. Participating in its inner life – either as an actual delegate or as a student simulating its operations – can be a humbling experience because of this. At the end, no technical plan – however well-crafted or needed – can make its way from the blueprint to implementation without the support of its member states (and in some cases, of the concurring alignment of the Great Powers). And such a plan can only be adopted if it is aligned with the inter- and intra-rules, rhythms, and rationales of the UN’s complex hierarchy of organs. At the end of the day, a successful lawyer-diplomat must not only master the substance of the matter at hand but also learn to navigate the troubled waters of UN law – and international institutional law, more broadly understood.

And in our dire times, competence and sensibility in these arcane arts of multilateral diplomacy are needed more than ever. For even if the UN – or more specifically, the GA – is a just “talk shop,” we should remember what the promise of deliberative parliamentary diplomacy meant in the previous century. For a generation scared by the Great War of 1914 (which was caused,

to a large degree, by a dark web of bilateral negotiations and the obligations enshrined in secret alliance treaties), the opening of the League of Nations' Assembly in 1920 meant the promise of a new dawn in multilateral diplomacy. This was especially true for small states, which participated – for the very first time – in global governance as equals (Rappard 1934). The years that followed in the so-called interwar period witnessed the collapse of that so-called liberal rules-based order, as Great Powers rivalries led to the slow partition and annexation of many of their smaller neighbours. Bilateral and secret negotiations, moreover, did little to “appease” the hunger of such Great Powers and eventually led to another, even greater, Second World War (Wieviorka 2023). Those were the painful memories which haunted the horizon of the men and women who came together in San Francisco “to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war, which twice in our lifetime has brought untold sorrow” (UN Charter, Preamble). In our own times of increased geopolitical tensions, marked once again by the return of secretive diplomatic negotiations between Great Powers that exclude the “smaller” states whose fate lies in the balance, we should not forget the painful lessons of the twentieth century. For all of its flaws, the UN still offers a *forum* based on the equal rights “of nations large and small,” which can provide *resources* to the latter – and maybe even act as a protective *actor* on their behalf. It was only until the outbreak of the Second World War that the League of Nations closed its Assembly in Geneva (Biltoft 2020). Let's hope the UN never closes its “talking shop” in Manhattan – for the alternative, surely, can only be worse.

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